



# NEWS

## U.S. Department of the Interior

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### **Kempthorne Reiterates Interior's Commitment to Marshall Islands Leaders, Visits Majuro, Kwajalein, Ebeye**

MAJURO, Republic of the Marshall Islands – Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne held two days of discussions with leaders in this North Central Pacific nation, reiterating the Department of the Interior's commitment to work with both the public and private sectors to help meet the critical education and health needs of the Marshallese

At an opening ceremony for new elementary school buildings, Kempthorne said, "I have seen today in the faces of these students that the future of the Republic of the Marshall Islands is bright. I am proud that the Department of the Interior, through this Compact of Free Association infrastructure grant, is investing in that future."

The new buildings at Rita Elementary School, constructed with Interior funding, will allow the school to educate 1,000 students. Marshalls President Kessai Note attended the ceremony with Kempthorne, and First Lady Mary Note cut the ceremonial ribbon. Dozens of students attended the ceremony and sang their school song.

In addition to President Note, Kempthorne met with members of the Marshalls' Nitijela (Legislature), local officials and business leaders during his June 12 -13, 2007, visit to this freely associated state. Kempthorne was accompanied by BJ Penn, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Installations and Environment; Donald Schregardus, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Environment; and David Cohen, Interior's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs.

The Secretary visited the U.S. Army's Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Island and nearby Ebeye Island. The test site employs about 1,000 Marshallese who live on Ebeye, a one-mile-long, two-hundred-yard-wide island with one of the highest population densities in the Pacific. Kempthorne visited Ebeye to see first-hand the living conditions of residents. He met with healthcare professionals and patients at Ebeye's only hospital, which was constructed with Interior funding. He also made an unscheduled stop at a park and played basketball with local children.

On Majuro, Kempthorne also met with representatives from atolls that were affected by U.S. nuclear weapon tests in the Marshall Islands in the 1940s and 1950s. Section 177 of the Compact of Free Association with the Marshall Islands provided for settlement of all

claims arising out of the nuclear testing programs the United States conducted at Bikini and Eniwetok Atolls from 1946 to 1958. Under Section 177, the U.S. Government has made payments of more than \$500 million, which included \$135 million for Bikini and Rongelap resettlements.

Under the Compact, Interior administers more than \$40 million annually in grants to the Marshall Islands for health, education, construction, private sector development and public sector capacity building. Interior also provides grants for technical assistance and for the operation and maintenance of buildings, roads and utilities. Additionally, Interior makes annual contributions to a trust fund that will provide income for the Marshalls after Compact grants expire in 2023.

In addition to the Marshall Islands, Kempthorne's visit to U.S.-affiliated Pacific island communities has included the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau, both freely associated states, and the U.S. territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Kempthorne concludes his orientation tour with a visit to American Samoa.

As Secretary of the Interior, Kempthorne is responsible for generally administering the Federal Government's relationship with the U.S. territories (other than Puerto Rico) and administering the financial assistance provided to the freely associated states under the Compacts of Free Association.

The Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands were, prior to becoming sovereign nations, part of the U.S.-administered U.N. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. They negotiated with the U.S. to become independent nations with a unique relationship to the United States known as "free association".

Under this status, the United States is responsible for the defense of the freely associated states and can deny other foreign powers military access to the freely associated states and their waters. Citizens of the freely associated states may migrate to the United States without a visa and live and work there indefinitely. The United States also provides substantial financial assistance to the freely associated states and makes them eligible for several domestic programs. The terms of this unique status are spelled out in bilateral agreements known as Compacts of Free Association.

The Marshall Islands consist of two archipelagic island chains with a total of 29 atolls, each made up of many small islets, and five single islands in the North Central Pacific Ocean, about half way between Hawaii and Australia. None of these islands is more than a few meters above sea level. Total land area is 70 square miles; the population is about 62,000. The capital is Majuro, which lies some 2,300 miles southwest of Honolulu and nearly 2,000 miles southeast of Guam.